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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

Cuba

FILE

Research Memorandum
RSB-149, August 25, 1962

TO : The Acting Secretary
THROUGH: S/S
FROM : INR - Roger Hilsman *R.H.*
SUBJECT: Soviet Military Shipments to Cuba

Danahy
Smith Band
Taylor
Schlesinger

We have examined available evidence on the unusually heavy Soviet shipments to Cuba during the past month.

CONCLUSIONS

A large part, possibly half, of the shipments have involved military hardware and Soviet military technicians.

The most likely explanation of Moscow's stepped up military assistance is that it is designed to enhance the Cuban regime's defense capabilities against an external threat, and increase the effectiveness of the military establishment for possible internal use.

Because of the lead times involved, the Soviet deliveries to Cuba probably could not have been planned to coincide with the latest Berlin developments. Nevertheless the Soviets may now calculate that US attention to Berlin will be diluted by Soviet activity in Cuba, and that in an atmosphere of generally heightened tension pressures for Western concessions will be enhanced.

Size and Nature of the Shipments. Since the last week in July, in addition to the normal tanker and cargo vessel movements, it is estimated that Soviet ship arrivals to the present, plus ships now enroute, total at least 26 including 5 passenger ships. The shipments are known to contain both military and economic goods and personnel. But information is limited on exactly how the volume is divided between the two; the following breakdown is at best a rough guess based upon available intelligence and some observation by reliable sources.

About one dozen of the cargo ships are believed to be carrying military equipment -- electronic equipment such as radar, motor transport, construction equipment, and tracked vehicles -- some of which has been observed in Cuba. Information on construction sites in Cuba suggests that surface-to-air missiles may have been included in the military equipment delivered, but there is no hard evidence on this score.

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Regarding the personnel on the five passenger ships, 1500 from one vessel landed at the Mariel naval base and are thought to be Bloc technicians and/or Cuban naval personnel returning from courses in the USSR. No breakdown is available. There is less certainty about the numbers and types of additional personnel that may have been embarked or are still on the way. A total of as high as 5,000 Bloc personnel -- both military and technical, though the proportions are unknown -- may be involved.

The remainder of the Soviet shipments, roughly one-half, consist of deliveries -- already behind schedule -- of equipment and technical assistance personnel under aid and trade agreements.

In sum, while the exact quantities of Soviet material and personnel which have arrived in Cuba are not known, it appears almost certainly to be of such magnitude as to significantly increase Soviet direct military involvement in Cuba.

Soviet Motivation. The most likely Soviet motivation in providing military assistance and personnel to Cuba is to enhance the Cuban regime's defense capabilities against an external threat and increase the effectiveness of the military establishment for possible internal use. The Soviets doubtless recognize that the contributions this level of Soviet military presence makes to Cuban defense capabilities would be of scant aid to Cuba were the United States to decide upon direct military intervention to Cuba. However, by raising the Cuban defense capability the Soviets are raising the military effort required to intervene. Hence, they may calculate that by increasing Cuban defense capabilities in this way they are strengthening the deterrent factors which would enter into US consideration of possible military intervention. Moreover, the Soviets doubtless believe that their military assistance will serve to deter any intervention not overtly involving US forces.

The Soviets have acquired a growing stake in the survival of the Castro regime. After initial hesitations, they viewed the Cuban leader's consolidation of power with elation; and they have been unstinting in proclaiming the Cuban regime as a model for successful, Moscow-supported "national liberation-struggle." In so doing, they have become increasingly committed to the preservation and advancement of the Castro regime. Economic aid designed to keep the Castro regime afloat has been expanded by emergency shipments of consumer goods and the first signs of development projects. Even more important, the Soviets have officially endorsed Castro's claims to communist affiliation and now address him as "Comrade."

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It is fairly certain that the Cuban regime fears more than anything else an attack by the US, or other forces strongly, if indirectly, supported by the US. Combined with this concern, and reinforcing it, is the difficult domestic situation presently confronting the Cuban leaders. Active support for the Castro regime has been estimated to include only about 20 percent of the population, with attitudes among the remaining four-fifths of the population ranging from apathy to passive and active resistance.

The Soviets may well share the Cuban regime's concern over external and internal threats to its security. They are certainly aware of the regime's domestic economic difficulties. In any event, they would find it difficult to deny Castro's requests for military-economic assistance even if they did not fully share his appraisal of the need. The scale of the current Soviet effort thus reflects the seriousness of the problem faced by the Castro regime, and is renewed proof of Moscow's determination to go to considerable lengths to assure that regime's survival.

It seems likely, at the same time, that the Soviets have undertaken a sizeable military buildup in Cuba with some reluctance. And they would probably like to minimize the extent of their military presence in Cuba. To establish a large and publicly acknowledged Soviet military presence in Cuba would have distinct disadvantages for the USSR.

First, and most important, it would heighten Moscow's commitment to underwrite the Cuban regime's security in circumstances unfavorable to the USSR. Second, it would heighten the threat to that regime's security by giving the US, alone or in conjunction with other American states, added motivation to move against the Castro regime.

It is probably because of these factors that Soviet support is being rendered in the relative absence of bluster and ballyhoo. Also the Soviets would presumably prefer not to be overly "provocative" toward the US. Likewise the Soviets would no doubt be concerned to restrain Castro, at least for some time to come, from direct provocations of the US or other countries. We believe that this restraint will apply also to possible Cuban designs on Guantanamo, though it would not exclude increased harassment and verbal attacks on the US presence there.

Relationship to Possible Moves Against Guantanamo. It continues to be unlikely that the Castro regime will make any direct military move against the Guantanamo Base. However, they may well adopt a more belligerent posture toward the US presence there. Since the beginning of July the Cuban press and other propaganda media have been giving new and extensive coverage to government allegations (over 100) of US air and sea incursions into Cuban territory and to alleged provocations by the US naval base at Guantanamo. The harassment of marine sentries at the base has increased in the same period.

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There is a possibility that the regime intends this publicity as part of an overall campaign to impress world opinion with alleged US disregard for Cuban sovereignty. In addition to providing justification for the new Soviet aid and the further militarization of the island it may also be the principal point of attack in a combined Cuban-Bloc move aimed at Guantanamo at the next session of the UN General Assembly.

Cuba and Berlin. We doubt that the immediate timing of the Soviet deliveries to Cuba is specifically related to the latest Soviet moves in Berlin. Because of the lead time necessary to get such shipments in route, the decision to send them must have been made several months ago. We do, however, think that there may be a broad relationship: the Soviets may believe that US attention to Berlin will be diluted by evidence of Soviet activity in another sensitive region and they may calculate that in an atmosphere of generally heightened tension pressures for Western concessions can be stimulated.

We do not believe that the Soviets are toying with some form of quid pro quo gambit involving Western concessions in Berlin in exchange for curtailment of Soviet activities in Cuba. Moscow undoubtedly regards its positions in both these areas as sufficiently strong to make it unnecessary and undesirable to use one as a bargaining counter for the other. In short, Moscow probably believes it can reduce the Western position in Berlin while simultaneously strengthening its own position (and Castro's) in Cuba.

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